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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 525th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 5 October 1998, at 10 a.m.

Temporary Chairman: Mr. SKOGMO (Norway)

Chairman: Mr. RODRIGUEZ CEDEÑO (Venezuela)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION (item 1 of the provisional agenda)

1. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN declared open the forty-ninth session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

STATEMENT BY THE OUTGOING CHAIRMAN

2. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN, speaking in his capacity as Chairman of the forty-eighth session, said that the past year had been an eventful one for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR had pursued its important mission on every continent despite serious funding problems requiring sharp cutbacks in its programmes. Once more, UNHCR had shown itself capable of responding rapidly and effectively to new situations.

3. At the preceding session, some positive trends had taken shape at the global level: democratization, the end of civil wars that had raged for a long time, the start-up of major repatriation operations, etc. However, fresh threats to stability seemed to be emerging. The High Commissioner, on her return from Kosovo, had received information about renewed population displacements. In Africa, although the favourable trends observed in many countries continued, the Great Lakes region was once again in upheaval. The international community confronted difficult issues in the humanitarian field. Were there any limits to the responsibilities relating to humanitarian action? In the search for comprehensive approaches to complex emergency situations, what should be done when humanitarian organizations found themselves isolated? Should the staff of humanitarian organizations continue to be exposed to risks that those responsible for peacekeeping were no longer prepared to take? Despite the absence of simple answers to those questions, certain basic principles could be defined, such as the need to insist on countries fulfilling their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights instruments, to ensure that the notion of protection remained at the centre of UNHCR activities and to trust in the judgement of those elected to run UNHCR.

4. In that regard, he said he welcomed Mrs. Ogata's recent re-election as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. As an ardent defender of the essential principles of the international protection of refugees and of the search for concrete solutions to their problems, she had become an important symbol of humanitarian action, of the spirit of compassion and of international solidarity with those who were weakest.

5. During his period of office as Chairman of the Executive Committee, he had better appreciated the pressure the High Commissioner and her colleagues were under. Those pressures were exerted simultaneously by the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons who needed international protection, host countries, which needed help to lighten their burden, countries of origin, which expected support for repatriation and reintegration operations, and the Governments of donor countries, which demanded complete transparency from UNHCR.

6. UNHCR had shown remarkable professionalism, skilfully meeting numerous challenges. It was continually trying to improve its operations in the field by seeking guidance from the members of the Executive Committee and that was the best guarantee that it would be able to pursue its important mission in the future. The Standing Committee had proved an extremely flexible instrument that had made it possible constantly to monitor the main aspects of UNHCR's work: programmes, management issues, control functions, financing, thematic issues and the study of regional situations. The spirit of dialogue and consensus that governed its proceedings, like those of the Executive Committee, was one of the strengths of the institution. Such consensus-building also embraced other United Nations bodies, representatives of the Bretton Woods institutions and other humanitarian organizations, as well as a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

7. One of the most important issues addressed during the past year was the safety of staff members of UNHCR and humanitarian organizations, which was still a matter of active concern given the often very dangerous conditions in which they worked. The financial situation of UNHCR also remained very worrying and it was essential, during the current session, to consider ways of providing it with more predictable financial resources. At the level of informal discussions, a review of the UNHCR budget structure had begun, which should make financial management more transparent. It was to be hoped that the unofficial consultations on UNHCR resettlement policy would make it possible to take a decision on that subject at the current session. The Executive Committee's methods of work had also been the subject of preliminary discussions with the Bureau. A number of interesting proposals had been formulated, aimed at lengthening the planning cycle and concentrating the Committee's work into three annual meetings, rather than four. He asked the Committee to continue to support the High Commissioner in her difficult task.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS (item 2 of the provisional agenda)

8. Mr. MONTENEGRO MALLONA (Nicaragua) nominated Mr. Rodriguez Cedeño (Venezuela) for the office of Chairman.

9. Mr. BRUUN (Denmark) and Mr. BENJELLOUN-TOUIMI (Morocco) seconded the nomination.

10. Mr. Rodriguez Cedeño (Venezuela) was elected Chairman by acclamation.

11. Mr. MORJANE (Tunisia) nominated Mr. Pérez-Hernández y Torra (Spain) for the office of Vice-Chairman.

12. Mr. SINGH (India) and Mr. FYFFE (Canada) seconded the nomination.

13. Mr. Pérez-Hernández y Torra (Spain) was elected Vice-Chairman by acclamation.

14. Ms. BAUTISTA (Philippines) nominated Mr. Liu Xinsheng (China) for the office of Rapporteur.

15. Mr. GERBER (Switzerland) seconded the nomination.

16. Mr. Liu Xinsheng (China) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.

17. Mr. Rodriguez Cedeño (Venezuela) took the Chair.

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

18. The CHAIRMAN said that the massive displacements of persons within a territory or outside their country's borders was one of the most sensitive issues in contemporary international relations. The protection of refugees, the help that should be provided to them and the search for durable solutions concerned not only those countries directly affected, whether countries of origin, countries of transit or host countries, but the whole of the international community, which had a duty of solidarity. UNHCR played a laudable and fundamental role in that regard and it required the international community's unconditional support, particularly since it was facing considerable financial difficulties in its efforts to fulfil its mandate.

19. The Executive Committee's task was to take constructive decisions to help formulate standards and principles that would allow UNHCR to confront as effectively as possible the problems stemming from population displacements throughout the world. The agenda for the current session reflected the importance and extent of that task. It was based on the new methods of work adopted by the Committee in 1995.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (item 3 of the provisional agenda) (A/AC.96/XLIX/L.1)

20. The agenda was adopted.

ANNUAL THEME: INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND BURDEN-SHARING IN ALL ITS ASPECTS: NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR REFUGEES (agenda item 4) (A/AC.96/898 and A/AC.96/904)

Opening statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

21. Mrs. OGATA (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) recalled that, in the current situation, there were many reasons for refugee aid organizations to be concerned, whether it was conflict in Africa, the social and economic crisis in the Russian Federation or financial turmoil in Asia. In the period since the preceding session of the Executive Committee, grave human displacement crises had occurred, although they were different from the humanitarian disasters of the early 1990s. Emergency situations were now more scattered, smaller and less visible on the international stage: UNHCR had had to reinforce its field presence many times and up to a hundred staff were now deployed on emergency missions. Although recent trends towards voluntary repatriation had given rise to the hope that refugee problems would diminish, the number of people of concern to UNHCR had only marginally decreased. The main reason for that was a flare-up of conflicts, which, on the one hand, slowed down the search for solutions to the problem and, on the other, gave those repatriated only a "fragile" peace.

22. In Afghanistan, conflict continued, along with grave violations of human rights. Although more than 80,000 Afghan refugees had decided to return home

from Pakistan in 1998 despite the situation, refugees in Iran had returned only very slowly and reintegration activities had virtually stopped. In Georgia, a new outbreak of internal conflict had once again forced 40,000 people to flee the Gali area and 1,500 houses, many newly rehabilitated with UNHCR funds, had been looted and burned. In Cambodia, the sporadic violence that had affected the peace process meant that 39,000 Cambodians were still in refugee camps in Thailand, a country that also hosted around 100,000 refugees from Myanmar. A solution has still to be found to the problem of 95,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. The principles and modalities for an enhanced UNHCR presence in that area had been determined.

23. In Africa, conflicts were becoming increasingly complex and a number of factors had contributed to blocking solutions to refugee problems: increased violence against civilians, as in Sierra Leone, the ethnic component of some conflicts, as in the Great Lakes region, and the regionalization of wars. In West Africa, the crises in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau had forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee. Although the situation in Guinea-Bissau seemed to be settling down, almost half a million Sierra Leonean refugees had placed an enormous burden on countries such as Guinea and Liberia, which had agreed to take them despite their limited resources. Central Africa's refugee problem persisted: there were, for example, 260,000 Burundi refugees in Tanzania. Repatriation operations continued, but there was still a risk of large-scale international displacement, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, if ethnic and nationality problems were not resolved. In Angola, serious setbacks were hindering the implementation of the Lusaka Peace Accords: UNHCR had been compelled to suspend the repatriation of Angolan refugees from neighbouring countries sine die and the resumption of hostilities had caused a fresh outflow of 30,000 refugees and the displacement of hundreds of thousands within the country, forcing UNHCR to deploy emergency rescue teams. In the Horn of Africa, the repatriation of Ethiopian refugees from Sudan and Somali refugees from Ethiopia indicated that some of the long-standing problems were being resolved. She called on the Governments concerned and the international community to do all in their power to maintain peace in the region. The ongoing conflict in southern Sudan continued to block solutions for refugees in Ethiopia and Uganda and recent bombardments had even forced UNHCR to close its offices in two places. The repatriation of Sahrawi refugees depended on the western Sahara peace process.

24. The relationship between conflict and displacement was nowhere more evident than in the province of Kosovo in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Having just returned from a tour of the region to assess the situation of the 45,000 displaced persons in Montenegro, the 20,000 refugees in Albania and the estimated 200,000 displaced people in Kosovo, she said that the main reason for such population movements was the excessive use of force by the security services, which were terrorizing civilians - although that did not excuse the serious human rights violations committed by the Kosovo Liberation Army. UNHCR had substantially increased its local operational capacity, but Kosovo remained a political problem requiring an immediate political solution. European countries were rightly concerned about the situation and she urged them to maintain an open attitude towards asylum-seekers from that area.

25. Humanitarian action was no substitute for political solutions, yet humanitarian workers were frequently still alone on the ground. The sharing

of States' responsibilities towards uprooted people was based more than ever on international cooperation. With globalization about to give a very different meaning to the key features of traditional refugee movements - distances and borders - it might be time to develop a global solidarity agenda for the twenty-first century. It had to be reaffirmed that international cooperation to solve refugee problems must be based on protection principles, with the right to asylum as the cornerstone. However, the industrialized countries and an increasing number of developing countries were adopting asylum legislation geared more to controlling than protecting asylum-seekers. People fleeing violence and persecution were, it was true, frequently found together with those who were trying to improve their economic situation and States also had to protect themselves from terrorism and other threats to their security. Nevertheless, the right to asylum was frequently the only means left for the international community to save lives, so it was important to restore confidence in that essential protection instrument.

26. The protection regime was also based on refugee resettlement, which was a concrete reflection of international cooperation. Although some countries were threatening to decrease resettlement opportunities as the number of asylum-seekers grew, she welcomed the steps taken by other countries, such as the United States of America, to increase their quotas. It was also encouraging to note that it had been possible to resettle refugees in countries from which refugees used to flee, such as South Africa, Chile and Argentina. UNHCR had continued to promote international cooperation through regional processes such as the CIS Conference, the Asia-Pacific Consultations and the Central and South-West Asia and the Middle East Consultations. A number of new initiatives had recently been taken, especially in the areas of protection, security and reintegration of returnees. Firstly, UNHCR was making efforts to promote a dialogue with States to find ways of reinvigorating international protection and making it more effective. Second, UNHCR had, in particular, participated in a meeting of eight central African Governments, organized in Kampala in May 1998 in conjunction with the Organization of African Unity, at which the participants had reaffirmed their support for the refugee protection principles embodied in the OAU Convention and had requested OAU and UNHCR to continue to work on the security issues of regional concern. UNHCR was cooperating closely with the United Nations Department of Peace-keeping Operations on proposals to establish a system of standby arrangements to address insecure refugee situations in Africa. Third, UNHCR was actively promoting international cooperation on reintegration following voluntary repatriation, especially in post-conflict situations. That had been the main objective of the regional strategy developed in early 1998 for the sustainable return of the 1.8 million persons displaced by the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

27. There had also been positive developments in other regions. For example, some 65,000 Chakma refugees had returned voluntarily from India to Bangladesh under a bilateral arrangement between the two countries. The Guatemalan refugee situation was also being brought to a successful conclusion through a combination of repatriation and local integration in Mexico. In Africa, the repatriation of refugees to Mali and Niger had been completed. Nearly 200,000 Liberian refugees had returned to their country since December 1997, either spontaneously or with UNHCR assistance. If peace prevailed in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, the repatriation and

reintegration of refugees and other uprooted people would be key elements in the peace-building process in the entire region. Planning for those operations must therefore begin early. Post-conflict operations mounted by UNHCR in Rwanda and Liberia, for example, had faced serious difficulties as a result of massive return movements to situations of fragile peace. In those two countries, insufficient support for returnee reintegration projects had compelled UNHCR to cut back its programmes drastically, although reintegration was an inherent part of the UNHCR mandate. That withdrawal had not been offset by a parallel increase in development activities, and that further jeopardized the peaceful coexistence of divided communities. UNHCR had held discussions with a number of Governments and with other United Nations bodies, including UNDP and the World Bank, on ways of bridging the existing gaps. UNHCR attached great importance to the work of the United Nations Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs and cooperation with organizations such as UNICEF, the World Food Programme, the International Organization for Migration, the International Committee of the Red Cross, regional organizations such as the European Union, and NGOs.

28. With regard to the resources and management of UNHCR, a body funded almost entirely through voluntary contributions, fund-raising efforts were useful in motivating the staff constantly to improve its work and in drawing world attention to the refugee situation. However, those contributions had in many cases been cut or delayed, since control of public spending was the keyword in many countries. If the current General Programme deficit was not covered by the end of the year, operational expenditures would have to be further reduced. Some special programmes in, for example, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Liberia, had also been seriously affected. Financing should be both flexible and predictable if UNHCR action was to continue to be effective. Programme reduction had had a considerable impact on human resources management. One thousand posts had been cut in less than two years. External recruitment continued to be frozen, which meant that it had been more difficult to attain the goal of overall gender equity among the organization's staff. Women nevertheless accounted for 39 per cent of UNHCR staff and steps had been taken to further improve their representation, particularly in the higher grades.

29. The security of humanitarian staff was still one of the most worrying subjects, as illustrated by the case of Vincent Cochetel, head of a UNHCR office in the Russian Federation, who had been abducted eight months before in the Caucasus and had still not been released. Of all UNHCR employees, 21 per cent were working in what the United Nations considered high-risk duty stations. Aside from the administrative measures that could be proposed in inter-agency discussions, the problem must be dealt with in a broader political context. For that reason, UNHCR was one of those requesting that crimes committed against humanitarian staff should be tried by the newly established International Criminal Court.

30. With regard to UNHCR management reform, she said that more than half of the activities planned in the context of Project Delphi had been implemented and good progress had been made with many others. Of the priority projects to be implemented in order to consolidate the action, it was appropriate to single out the development of the Operations Management System (OMS), which would enable all projects to be planned, budgeted, implemented and evaluated

more comprehensively and rationally than before thanks to the replacement of information technology systems. Another reform measure was the implementation of the Career Management System (CMS). The reforms would require sustained commitment and financial support for three or four years. She attached the greatest importance to good management standards and had therefore appointed an inspector; the services in his charge had been extremely active. Since 1995, inspections had been carried out in 68 countries, i.e. 60 per cent of UNHCR programmes. Greater attention was now to be paid to evaluation activities and to the management responsibility of UNHCR representatives in the field.

31. Lastly, she noted that the following two years would be marked by the thirtieth anniversary, in 1999, of the OAU Convention governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, and the fiftieth anniversary, in December 2000, of the General Assembly resolution instituting the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. They were symbolic dates, which indicated the extent to which refugees had been part of the history of the twentieth century and they would add significance to UNHCR's work. The main priority of her next mandate would be to reach out to Governments and civil society in order to make global solidarity a concrete reality and to ensure the effectiveness of policy. That would require, in particular, maintaining the emergency preparedness and response capacity that had been built up over the previous six years, managing human resources more fairly and flexibly, ensuring a more predictable and flexible funding base and, lastly, maintaining and promoting a human approach to UNHCR's work. UNHCR staff was aware that it was not only the effective use of resources, but also and especially the lives and welfare of thousands of men and women that depended on the quality of that work.

32. Mr. SOMMARUGA (International Committee of the Red Cross) said that humanitarian action currently faced three main challenges: the globalization of international responsibility, the renewed relevance of international humanitarian law for dealing with population displacement and the need for effective coordination.

33. The world had become a global village and humanitarian problems were the responsibility of all States. The international instruments on refugees, humanitarian law and human rights were all based on common principles, namely, that no one could remain indifferent to the distress of fellow human beings and that international cooperation was essential in order to provide the necessary protection and assistance to the most vulnerable. However, the international community's responsibility did not stop with attending to the vital needs such crises created by providing humanitarian organizations with the funding they needed to carry out their mandates. It also had a duty to prevent and resolve conflicts and to firmly repress the violations committed in such situations.

34. In Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, human tragedy on a vast scale could have been avoided if measures aimed at prevention, international law enforcement and conflict resolution had been implemented in a timely and courageous manner, with a clear line being drawn between initiatives of a political and military nature on the one hand and

humanitarian action on the other. The norms and principles of international humanitarian law, of which ICRC was the traditional guardian, made it possible to prevent a large proportion of the population movements caused by armed conflicts and similar situations of violence. It was therefore of paramount importance to promote and respect humanitarian law, whose provisions also applied to refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees.

35. The issue of internally displaced persons was of particular relevance. ICRC had long considered displaced persons as victims of war and made sure that they benefited from the same rules of protection as anyone who was not involved in hostilities. He recalled that, in the case of non-international armed conflicts, article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions had been ratified by 188 States and that Protocol II additional to those Conventions, which expanded and clarified the rules contained in article 3, was now binding on 142 States. That instrument clearly prohibited arbitrary displacements and proclaimed the right of those affected by such practices to receive impartial assistance. In that regard, ICRC welcomed the outcome of the work carried out by the Representative of the Secretary-General on the question of internally displaced persons.

36. Humanitarian coordination was vital in meeting the needs created by so many emergency situations: in discharging its "global responsibility", the international community must organize its tasks harmoniously and allocate its resources rationally. The humanitarian institutions, for their part, had to maintain strict control over their expenditure, evaluate the impact of their programmes and eliminate all duplication of efforts, and that meant not only assessing and meeting the immediate needs of the victims, but also developing strategies that would enable them to regain their autonomy.

37. With regard to inter-agency coordination mechanisms, the focus should be on the quest for complementarity and added value, taking into account the specific responsibilities of each organization. ICRC participated in various forums both within and outside the United Nations, on the understanding that its independence, which was essential for fulfilling its mandate, would not be compromised. In that regard, the coordination between UNHCR and ICRC, which had become more systematic over the years, had often made it possible to avoid overlapping, as for example in Kosovo, Colombia and Sri Lanka, taking due account of the two agencies' respective missions and areas of expertise.

38. Humanitarian work was no exception to the globalization that was leaving its mark in all areas. Today's unresolved problems carried the seeds of tomorrow's crises, which would directly affect countries thus far spared war, disasters and underdevelopment. International solidarity was a more topical issue than ever. Having adopted emblematic instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, more than half a century before, the international community must give some thought to ways of breathing new life into those systems of protection and the universal values underpinning them. The next International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, due to be held in Geneva in November 1999, should make it possible to project into the future the spirit of those treaties, in order to persuade the world of their validity and usefulness.

39. Ms. TAFT (United States of America) congratulated Mrs. Ogata on her re-election as High Commissioner for Refugees for a further two years and paid tribute to all UNHCR staff, who often worked in dangerous conditions. Everyone had hoped that 1998 would be a year of repatriation, but new refugee situations had sprung up in Sierra Leone, Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The United States would work with UNHCR and other organizations in attempting to avert a humanitarian tragedy in Kosovo. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world, refugee protection was a principle that was respected less and less. In addition, owing to funding shortfalls, UNHCR had been forced to cut its programmes. The United States therefore called on all countries to renew their commitment to international humanitarian principles and provide UNHCR with the funding and guidance it needed to fulfil its mandate. The United States had recently contributed additional funding to UNHCR, bringing its total contribution for fiscal year 1998 to nearly $249 million. With regard to the allegations of mismanagement made against UNHCR, a reading of the audit report did not lead to such a conclusion - quite the contrary. Nevertheless, unresolved issues remained and the United States intended to follow developments closely as UNHCR implemented the report's recommendations.

40. The United States believed that the implementation of the principle of international solidarity was central to refugee protection and the search for durable solutions. Such solidarity was seen by many as a "burden" to be shared. Refugee protection demanded, rather, a sharing of responsibility. In addition, many countries throughout the world had benefited from the intellectual and economic contributions of refugees.

41. International solidarity could be expressed in various ways. The "donor community" should be seen as more than just the handful of nations that contributed the bulk of the cash and commodities needed by UNHCR. Countries hosting refugees, particularly those in the developing world, deserved the praise and acknowledgement of the international community. Any system of international solidarity must take into account the critical, though hard to quantify, support that many nations in the developing world provided to refugees in their territory.

42. The United States believed that there were seven core concepts involved in international refugee solidarity: respect for the principles of the 1951 Convention; refugee protection and the search for durable solutions; adaptation to regional circumstances; shared responsibility for finding political solutions to the conflicts and human rights abuses that created refugee problems; recognition of the important part played by resettlement of refugees in third countries, in addition to the solution of voluntary repatriation; the need to share among more countries the costs of assisting refugees; and, lastly, helping to build local capacity in host countries in order to better prepare them to prevent and mitigate the negative effects of refugee flows and other emergency situations.

43. Mr. KREID (Austria), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that massive outflows of refugees, in particular in the Great Lakes region, the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, had demonstrated the need to consider the possibility of establishing burden-sharing arrangements to address the humanitarian challenges of forced displacements and to promote sustainable

solutions to their causes. The European Union, whose members had not been spared refugee inflows, considered that burden-sharing should be approached comprehensively and should encompass all the various stages of a conflict or situation of distress that produced the influx of displaced persons. The international community should begin by taking preventive measures in the country of origin, where diplomatic initiatives and development aid could contribute to stabilizing the fragile political and economic situation and, then, in the event of a crisis, should provide the affected countries with the assistance they needed to deal with the refugees. Lastly, it should act as a mediator between the parties to the conflict and take part in peacekeeping or peacemaking operations in order to permit the early return of the displaced population in safety and dignity. The Plan of Action of the International Conference on Refugees in Central America (CIREFCA), for example, had had positive results because it had linked the return of refugees with rehabilitation, reconstruction and development programmes.

44. UNHCR had a key role to play in the collective response to humanitarian crises, through close collaboration with other organizations with complementary mandates (human rights, peacekeeping, development, etc.) in addressing the causes of mass displacement and their social and economic consequences, facilitating reconstruction and national reconciliation and preventing further displacements. Refugee inflows had negative consequences for political, security and economic situations and for the social fabric and environment of the affected countries, although it was difficult to assess their impact. The role of developing countries in refugee protection and humanitarian aid was, unfortunately, often underestimated. A great many of the contributions in kind made by such countries were practically impossible to quantify, whether they took the form of hospitality, solidarity or integration. UNHCR and the international community should make the public more aware of such issues, in particular through the medium of civil society.

45. In international law and in practical terms, the primary responsibility for protecting and caring for refugees and returnees lay with host countries. In that context, the European Union re-emphasized that international solidarity and burden-sharing could not and must not be a prerequisite for respecting the fundamental principles of refugee and human rights law, including asylum, non-refoulement and family unity. In addition, all persons had the right to return to their own countries and it was the national authorities' responsibility to facilitate their reintegration. However, in view of the costs involved in hosting and repatriating refugees and in the search for durable solutions, contributions to UNHCR funding represented a concrete form of burden-sharing: in 1997, 42 per cent of the contributions made to the organization had come from the European Union.

46. Burden-sharing was of course not an obligation either in statutory or in customary international law, but many international instruments demonstrated a solid political commitment to that principle and to the principle of international solidarity. Experience showed that consensus on a pre-set mechanism could be achieved only on a regional basis: solutions at the global level should continue to be of an ad hoc nature. In the wake of the massive outflow of refugees from the former Yugoslavia, the European Union Council of Ministers had adopted two important texts in 1995 outlining the crucial principles of a burden-sharing mechanism with regard to the admission and

residence of displaced persons on a temporary basis. In addition, as shown by the Comprehensive Plan of Action adopted by the International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees, such arrangements should not necessarily be limited to the countries of the region concerned. It was neither possible nor advisable to work out a rigid formula for sharing the burden by means of permanent or temporary protection or financial or other contributions. The criteria had to be flexible and have regard to the variety of emergency situations. He recalled, in that context, that a whole range of factors could influence the nature and extent of the assistance provided by each State.

47. The European Union, convinced of the need for a comprehensive approach to the problem of refugees, fully supported UNHCR, which deserved the financial and political backing of the international community in discharging its mandate.

48. Mr. ALAAS (Sudan) emphasized the importance of implementing burden-sharing arrangements with a view to helping host countries, which contributed most in terms of humanitarian aid, to deal with the adverse effects of refugee inflows. Sudan, which had been helping refugees from neighbouring countries for more than 30 years, was one of the chief donors despite the inadequacy of its resources. Far from constituting an important human resource that contributed to the development of host countries, refugees in fact represented a considerable burden, particularly as many of them were disabled or could not meet their own needs.

49. The assistance provided by the international community had fallen short of expectations. Despite the large number of rehabilitation projects that Sudan had submitted to UNHCR and to donors to offset the negative impact of refugee inflows to the affected areas, the majority of those projects had not received due consideration and those that had got under way had been stopped for no apparent reason, and that rebounded on the refugees. For humanitarian reasons, and not, unlike other countries, political ones, Sudan had done all in its power to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of refugees. In that regard, he welcomed neighbouring countries' peace initiatives, which should make it easier for refugees to return. He asked UNHCR to take the necessary steps to ensure their protection, particularly the protection of the children enlisted by the rebels in southern Sudan. The international community should act to provide assistance to refugees in the Sudan and to Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries and help to implement voluntary repatriation programmes. He hoped that the Ministerial Conference due to consider the refugee question in December 1998 under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) would be a success.

50. Mr. BEHZADIAN (Islamic Republic of Iran) noted that developing countries hosted three quarters of the world's refugee population. For seven years, the greatest number - 2 million - had been sheltered by Iran. Despite the problems that caused, almost all of their basic needs had been met, and that was an indication of Iran's attachment to the teachings of Islam and to international humanitarian law. Fresh influxes of refugees were expected owing to the instability in the region, particularly in Afghanistan in the wake of the events at Mazar-i-Sharif. The process of repatriating Afghan refugees had stalled and more Afghans were taking refuge in Iran.

51. Despite commendable efforts by host countries and the relevant international bodies, particularly UNHCR, the number of refugees was on the rise. The reasons were mainly to be found in the deterioration of the economic situation in some parts of the world, which was likely to hamper the search for any durable solution to the refugee problem. The host countries, whose resources were limited, were under severe pressure on the economic, social and security fronts. Burden-sharing, voluntary repatriation and resettlement should therefore be seen as the best long-term solutions. One of the basic reasons for the aggravation of the plight of refugees lay in the fact that the burden was unequally shared among the members of the international community. The developed countries should not merely make small contributions in cash or in kind; they should live up to their responsibilities by accepting the resettlement of refugees in their territory. To adopt legislation and regulations restricting and hindering entry by refugees was a clear violation of human rights and the principles of international law.

52. However useful regional approaches might be, the solution to the refugee problem, the causes of which should be approached in a comprehensive manner, was a matter for the international community. Voluntary repatriation should be prioritized as the most durable solution, while resettlement in third countries should be given high priority by the international community, in particular by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Refugee protection was a responsibility to be assumed at the international level without defining some aspects of it as mandatory and others as voluntary.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.